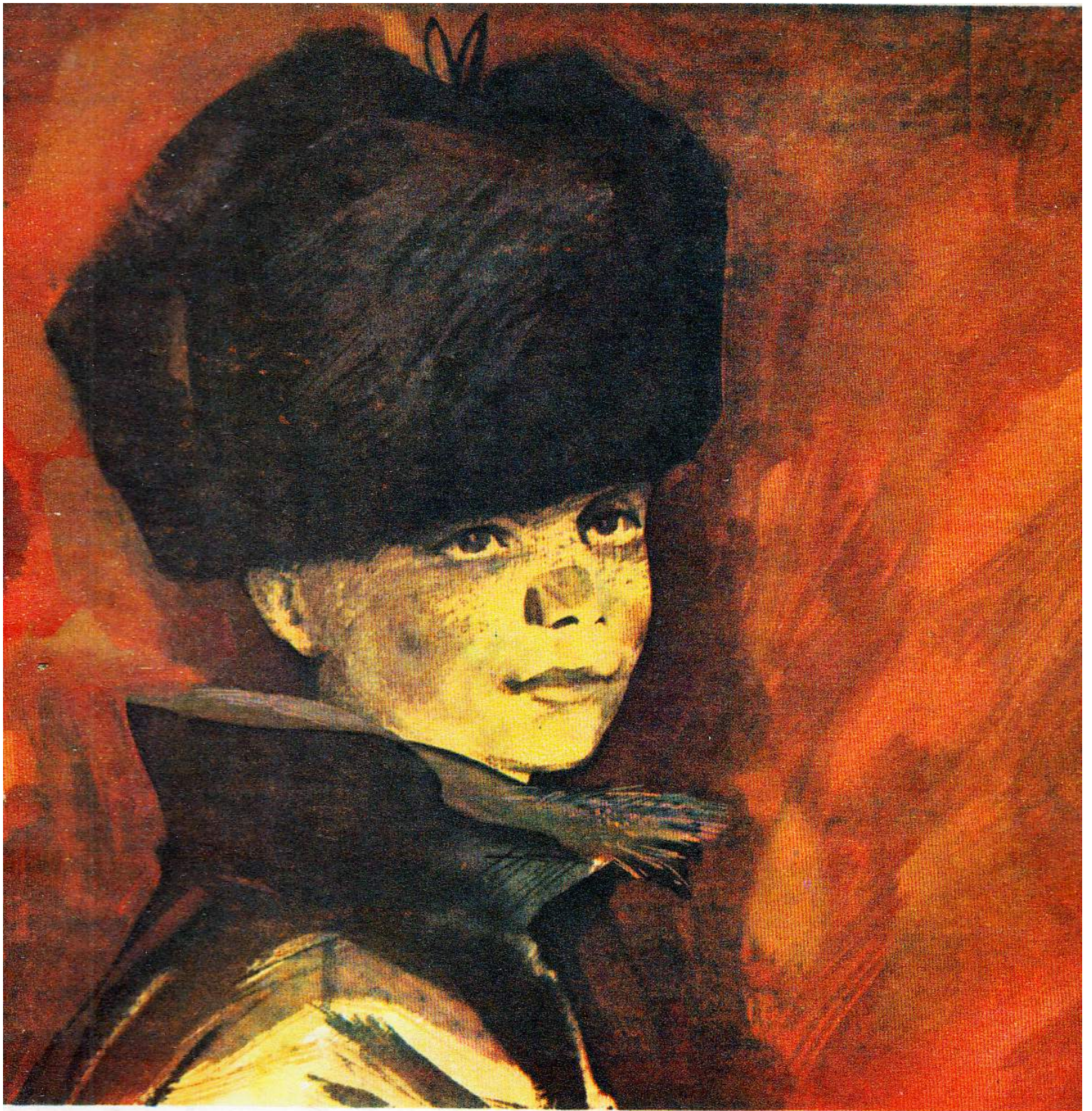
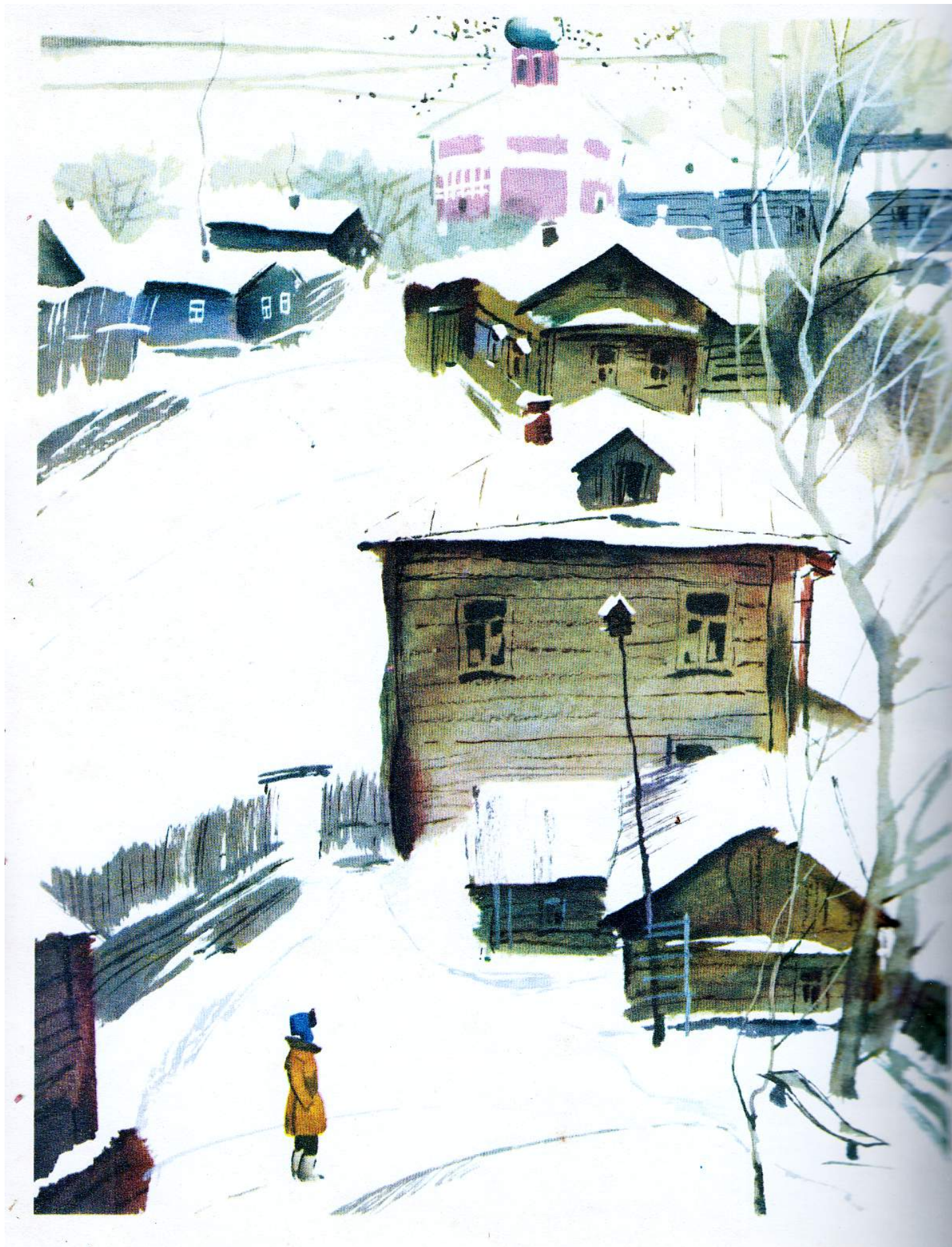




Boris Lavrenyov
**THE COURAGEOUS
HEART**



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He stood before the captain—a snub nose, high cheek-bones, a short coat with a brown mock-beaver collar. His little round nose had turned pink from the dry, freezing steppe wind. His chapped blue lips were trembling uncontrollably, but his sad dark eyes were fixed, almost severely, on the captain's face.

He seemed not to notice or pay any attention to the Red Navy men who had crowded round curiously to catch a glimpse of this unusual thirteen-year-old guest of the battery, a grim, battle-hardened grown-up world.

His shoes were not right for the weather: their grey canvas tops were worn through at the toes, and he kept shifting from one foot to the other while the captain read the covering note brought from section headquarters by the sailor who had accompanied the boy.

“Stopped at dawn at the front line by the sentry.... For the past two weeks claims to have been gathering information on the German units around the Novy Put State Farm. We're sending him to you. He can give valuable information....”

The captain folded the note and stuck it inside

his sheepskin coat. The boy kept looking at him expectantly.

“What’s your name? ”

The boy threw back his head, drew himself up and tried to click his heels, but his face quivered, and he winced with pain, glanced in fright at his feet and hung his head.

“Kolya, Nikolai Vikhrov, Comrade Captain,” he said.

The captain, too, glanced down at the boy’s feet, at his torn shoes, and shivered.

“Those shoes aren’t right for the time of year. Are your feet numb? ”

“A bit,” the boy said timidly and sadly, and dropped his head even lower.

He was trying his hardest to keep cheerful. The captain thought of him walking in those shoes through the night across the solidly frozen steppe and unconsciously wriggled his toes in his warm, leather-soled felt boots. He touched the boy’s icy cheek and said softly:

“Cheer up! We’ll find something more suitable for your feet.... Lieutenant Kozub! ”

The shortish jovial lieutenant popped out of

the cluster of Red Navy men and saluted.

"Tell the supply officer to fetch a pair of the smallest felt boots he's got. And tell him to be quick."

Kozub trotted off to carry out the order. The captain touched the boy on the shoulder.

"Let's go to my quarters. You'll get warm and we'll have a chat."

The blazing stove was crackling and humming in the captain's dugout. An orderly was slowly stirring the gold-glowing logs with a poker. Pink reflections from the flames chased one another across the wall. The captain took off his coat and hung it beside the door. The boy stood in the doorway, looking round. He appeared to be impressed by this cozy vaulted underground room with its dazzling white plaster and bright light from the lamp.

"Take your coat off," suggested the captain. "It's as hot as the beach here in summer. Warm up! "

The boy threw off his coat, folded it neatly inside out, stood on tip-toe and hung it over the captain's coat. The captain, who was looking on, liked the care he showed for his clothes. Without





his coat the boy looked thin and lanky. It's a long time since he's had a square meal, thought the captain.

"Sit down. Food first and then business. Can't talk on an empty stomach. Long ago there was a general who said the way to a soldier's heart was through his stomach. That was clever. A soldier with a full stomach will knock off five hungry ones. Do you like your tea strong? "

The captain filled a thick earthenware cup with the warm fragrant drink and unhurriedly cut off a large slice of bread, spread it with a finger-thick



layer of butter and crowned this with a piece of bacon. The boy looked at the gigantic sandwich with something akin to alarm.

“Don’t be bashful,” said the captain, prodding the plate. “Have some sugar.”

He pushed the piece of six-inch cartridge-case full of sparkling bluish sugar lumps across the table. The boy gave him an inquiring, wary look, chose a smallish lump and put it beside his cup.

“Oho! ” laughed the captain. “You’re breaking the rules. That’s not how we drink tea around here. We fill the tanks full. That little lump will only

spoil the tea."

And, with a splash, he dropped a paving-stone of sugar into the mug. The boy's haggard face suddenly wrinkled and large tears rolled uncontrollably onto the table. The captain sighed, moved closer and put his arms round the bony shoulders of his guest.

"That'll do," he said cheerfully. "Calm down, it's all in the past now. No one will hurt you here. I've got a lad just like you back home, except his name's Yurka. He's got freckles and a button nose just like yours."

Sheepishly, the boy quickly brushed away his tears.

"I'm alright, Comrade Captain.... It's not me.... I can take it. I just remembered my mum."

"Oh, so that's it," said the captain slowly. "So you have got a mum? "

"Yes," the boy's eyes lit up. "Only we haven't much to eat. At night, mum picks up potato peelings back of the German kitchen. One night the sentry caught her. He whacked her across the arm with his rifle butt. It won't bend any more."

He pressed his lips together and the boyish

softness faded from his eyes. They glittered angrily. The captain stroked his head.

"Be patient! We'll rescue your mum and all the others. Lie down and have a sleep."

The boy looked imploringly at him.

"I don't want to ... not now. Let me first tell you about Germans."

The persistence in his voice was so strong that the captain did not insist. He moved to the other side of the table and took out his notebook.

"All right, go on then.... How many Germans do you think there are around the farm? "

The boy tossed his head and answered confidently:

"One Bavarian infantry battalion of the 176th regiment, 27th Infantry Division. They've come straight from Holland."

"Oh! How did you get to know that? " asked the captain, astonished at the thorough and accurate reply.

"That's easy. I looked at the figures on their shoulder-straps and listened to them talking. I know German, I was always good in school.... There's a motorcycle company of submachine gun-



ners, and a platoon of medium-sized tanks on the pig farm. Deep trenches have been dug along the northern edge of the melon field, and they've put up two pillboxes there, they're strongly fortified, Comrade Captain. For ten days cement was brought in by lorry. They used 109 lorryfuls of it. I looked on from the window."

"Can you tell me exactly where the pillboxes are?" asked the captain, leaning forward. He realised that this was no ordinary boy of the sort who'd give you general and vague information. This was an alert, conscientious and accurate scout.

"Of course I can.... One's in the melon field behind the old threshing floor where there's a little mound, and the other's...."

"Hang on!" the captain interrupted. "You've done a splendid job to see and remember it all like this. But we've never been to your farm and haven't the faintest idea of where the melon field or threshing floor are. And believe me, ten-inch guns are no joke. If we begin hammering at random, we may cause a lot of unnecessary damage before we hit the mark. Besides, people from our side are in there.... Your mum, for instance...."





Could you draw us a sketch? ”

The boy threw back his head and gave him a puzzled look.

“Haven’t you got a map, Comrade Captain? ”

“Yes, I have ... but would you be able to make it out? ”

“Certainly! ” exclaimed the boy indignantly, “my dad’s a geodesist. I can even draw maps myself. Not very neatly, of course.... Now, my dad’s in the army, too. He’s a sapper commander,” he added proudly.

“You’re worth your weight in gold, you are,” joked the captain, unrolling his large-scale military map. The boy knelt on the table and bent over it. He examined it for a long time, then his face lit up and he poked it with his finger.

“There it is! ” he said, smiling happily. “Like on the palm of your hand. What a good map you’ve got! Detailed as a plan. Everything’s on it. Look, here’s the old threshing floor beyond the gulley.”

He knew his way round the map perfectly and the captain’s red crosses were soon dotted all over it. The captain leaned back in his chair with an air

of satisfaction.

“Very good, Kolya! ” He patted the boy’s hand approvingly. “That’s really splendid! ”

Sensing the spontaneous warmth of the gesture, the boy was swept back for an instant to his childhood and pressed his cheek tenderly to the captain’s palm. The captain shook his head sadly and put the map away.

“And now,” he said, “your orders are to sleep.”

The boy did not object. The nourishing food, the warmth and the awareness of a job well done had made him drowsy. He could hardly keep his eyes open, and yawned blissfully. The captain put him to bed on his bunk and covered him with his coat. The boy fell asleep at once. The captain stood pensively over him, thinking of his wife and son, then returned to the table to work out the firing distances. He became engrossed in the work and did not notice the time. The sound of someone softly calling made him look round. The boy was sitting up on the bunk with an expression of alarm.

“Comrade Captain, what’s the time? ”

“Go back to sleep! To hell with the time.



When the rumpus begins we'll wake you." But that did not satisfy the boy. His face clouded over and he spoke insistently, the words tumbling out of him.

"No! I've got to go back! I promised my mum. She'll think I've been killed. I'll be off as soon as it gets dark."

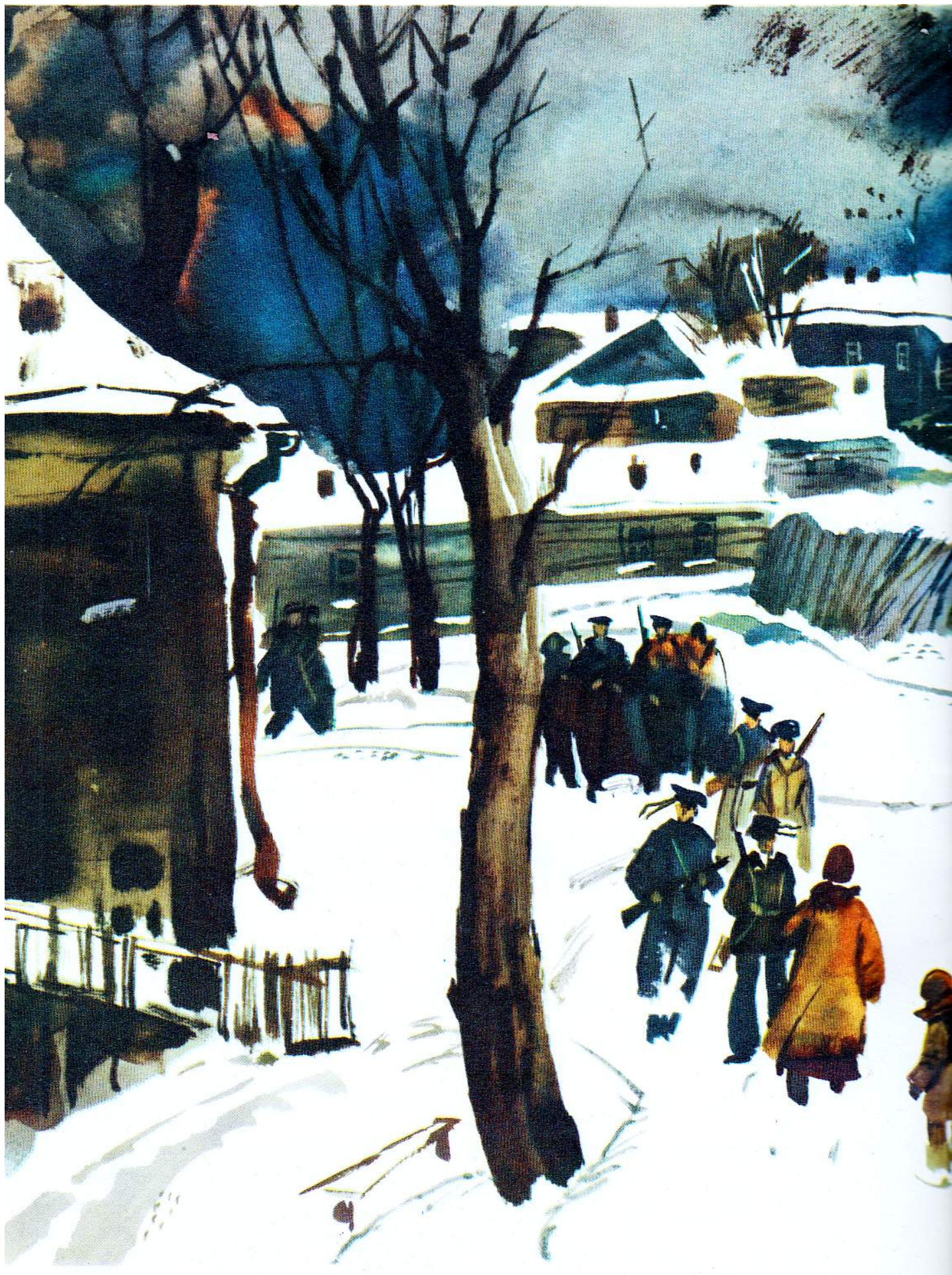
The captain was astonished. He would never have thought that the boy was prepared to repeat the terrible journey across the dark steppe that had succeeded purely by chance the first time. He thought his guest was still half-asleep, and did not quite know what he was saying.

"Nonsense! " he said. "Whoever would let you go? If you don't get caught by the Germans, you may come under our fire. That's all I could ever wish for—knocking you off in return for all you've done. Don't be ridiculous! Go back to sleep! "

The boy frowned and his face flushed.

"I won't get caught by the Germans. They don't patrol at night—afraid of the cold, and like their shut-eye too much. I know every path by heart. Please let me go! "

He begged so persistently, with a note almost





of fear, that the captain wondered for a moment if the boy's appearance and what he had to tell was a put-up job. But as he looked into the boy's clear sorrowful eyes he felt ashamed of his suspicions.

"You know Comrade Captain, that the Germans don't let anyone leave the farm. If they suddenly make a spot check and I'm not there, my mum will be in for it! "

His voice was sad with experience beyond his years. He was obviously worried about his mother's safety.

"Don't fret! I do understand," said the captain taking out his watch. "You're a good boy to be concerned about your mother. It's now sixteen thirty. Let's go to the observation post and check everything once more. When it gets dark, I promise you the lads will take you as far as they can. Alright? "

At the observation post out by the infantry positions the captain sat down before the range-finder. He saw the hilly Crimean steppe covered with greyish-yellow patches of snow which the wind had piled into the hollows. The crimson light of the sunset was fading. The orchards of the

distant farm loomed in dark strips on the horizon. The captain intently examined the contours of the orchards and the white dots of the buildings among them. Then he beckoned to the boy.

“Come and take a look! Perhaps you’ll see your mum....”

The boy smiled at the joke and bent over the eyepieces. The captain slowly turned the horizontal sighting to show his guest a panoramic view of his home. The boy suddenly gasped, stepped away from the eyepieces and tugged at the captain’s sleeve.

“The bird-box! My bird-box, Comrade Captain! Honest! ”

The astonished captain looked into the eyepiece. High over the patchwork of bare poplars, above a rusty green roof hung a tiny box on a long pole. It stood out very distinctly against the dark-grey texture of the clouds. The captain sat frowning for a few minutes. A vague thought that had stirred in his head at the sight of the bird-box was gradually taking hold. He took the boy by the hand, led him to one side and spoke to him quietly.



“Got it? ” he asked when he finished. The boy beamed and nodded.

The sky darkened. A biting winter wind blew in from the sea. The captain took the boy along the communication trench to the front line. There he briefly told the story to the company commander and asked for the boy to be secretly conducted as far as the approaches to the farm. Two Red Navy men disappeared with the boy into the darkness and the captain watched them go until the new white felt boots that had been brought from the stores on his orders were no longer



visible. All was quiet, but the captain listened anxiously, hoping there would be no sudden shots. He waited for half an hour and then returned to the battery.

Sleep would not come to him that night. He drank tea, and read. And before dawn he went to the observation post. When he made out the dark box on the pole in the grey mist of the approaching day, his battle calm returned. He gave the firing order. The turret's ranging salvo boomed and rumbled over the steppe. Its thunder lingered long over the deserted land. The captain kept looking

through the eyepieces and clearly saw the dark box on the pole wave twice ... and a third time after a pause.

“We’re overshot the mark ... to the right,” the captain said and ordered the correction. This time the bird-box remained still and the captain opened up from both the turrets. With a gunner’s sharp eye he saw fragments of concrete and timber in the cloud of explosions. He grinned and after three more volleys transferred the fire to the next target. And again the bird-box spoke to him in a language known to him alone. The third time the fire fell where the red crosses on the map marked the fuel and munitions dump. Now the captain hit the target at the first try. A wide strip of pale fire flashed across the horizon. A massive billowing cap of smoke rose up, dark-brown, laden with ash and lit from below by flashes of lightning. It engulfed everything: the trees, the roofs and the pole with its dark box. The explosion shook the ground like an earthquake and the captain wondered in alarm how much was left of the farm.

The buzzer began to whine. The front line was asking him to stop firing. The sailors had launched



an attack and were already breaking into the German trenches. The captain handed over the command to Lieutenant Kozub, jumped on a waiting motorcycle and, breaking cover, sped across the field. He was dying with impatience. He could hear machine gun fire and the clicking of hand grenades. Bewildered by the power and accuracy of the bombardment, the Germans resisted feebly and retreated now that they had lost their supporting points. The captain abandoned his motorcycle and ran through the fields right up to the edge of the village where only yesterday he would have drawn a shower of lead. From there he could see the gay red zips of the semaphore flags announcing the enemy's retreat. A silver mist of burning petrol wafted over the orchards to the dull roar of exploding munitions. The captain hurried towards the green roof amidst the broken poplars. From afar off, standing by the gate he saw a woman in a shawl holding a boy by the hand. When the boy caught sight of the captain, he rushed towards him. The captain swept him off his feet, tossed him in the air and smothered him with kisses. But the boy obviously did not feel like a little child right then.

He struggled against the captain's chest. The captain let him go.

Kolya stepped back and with no attempt to conceal his pride saluted and reported: "Comrade Captain, scout Nikolai Vikhrov has carried out his battle order."

"Well done, Nikolai Vikhrov," said the captain. "Thank you."

The woman with the tortured eyes and tired smile came up and shyly offered the captain her hand.

"Hello! He was waiting so impatiently for you.... He really was ... we all were. Thank you! "

She bowed low before the captain in the Russian manner and Kolya looked from his mother to the captain and smiled.

"You managed splendidly! But wasn't it scaring up in the attic when the shells were falling? " asked the captain, hugging him.

"That's not the word for it, Comrade Captain," replied the boy with simple frankness. "After the first few shells I thought we'd all collapse. The whole house was shaking. I nearly ran down, but didn't have the face. I was shivering like a leaf, but

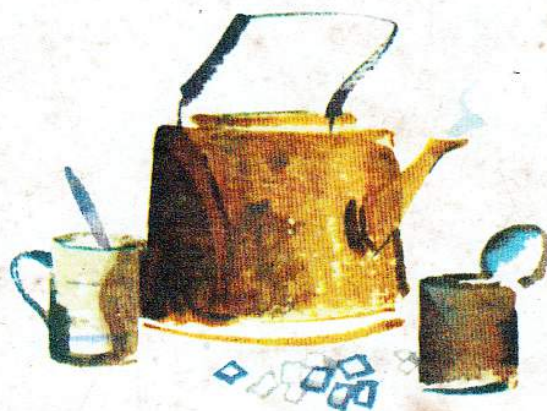
kept telling myself, 'Sit still! You've just got to! ' So I sat it out until the munitions dump went up.... Goodness alone knows how I got down again."

He gulped as he remembered it all, blushed and buried his head in the captain's coat a little Russian boy, a thirteen-year-old hero with a courageous heart, the heart of his people.

May 1942



Translated from the Russian by Jan Butler
Drawings by Yuri Fomenko



Б. Лавренев
БОЛЬШОЕ СЕРДЦЕ
На английском языке

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